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ABSTRACT

The understandings and perceptions held by school-site administrators and teachers about the process and procedures followed in referring students for special education were studied as part of the required annual evaluation of the special education program in San Diego Unified School District (California). Analysis of descriptive and qualitative data indicated that the referral process was heavily used as a resource for students in need of assistance even though many students were not eligible for special education services. The problems inherent in the funding patterns, procedural guidelines, and responsibilities of the assessment personnel are discussed and recommendations are made for organizational change and restructuring of the process. (Author)

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SPECIAL EDUCATION REFERRALS: CAN THE PROCESS HELP STUDENTS?

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School districts are required by federal and state legislation to identify and assess all children who might benefit from special education. Referrals and numbers of students placed in special education are increasing significantly. The incidence of special education referrals as reported in 28 large city school districts ranged between six to eleven percent of the total student enrollment (Lytle & Penn, 1986). The same study found that the 7.8 percent to 91.8 percent of those students referred were found to be eligible and placed into special education. While large numbers of students are referred annually, referral procedures have been the most widely criticized area in special education. Gartner & Lipsky (1987) indicated that the special education referral, assessment, and placement activities raise substantive issues related to cost and funding; professional judgment and the over-identification of learning handicapped students; and, discrimination as seen by the high numbers of minority and limited English proficient students referred and placed into special education. This criticism is long-standing and concerns have been raised at the local, state, and federal levels. Well over a decade ago, Hobbs (1975) concluded, based on his study of the issues related to the classification of children, that the referral and assessment procedures were a major barrier to the effective delivery of educational services to students and their families.

The expertise of district support staff such as psychologists, speech therapists, and diagnostic teachers are an important resource for the classroom teacher. These support personnel are largely funded by special education monies (CASP estimate - only 25 percent of school psychologists are district-funded in California). Consequently their primary role has become that of assessment and to determine student eligibility for special education. The understanding and perceptions held by school-site personnel about the referral procedures were studied as part of the required annual evaluation of the special education program in San Diego Unified School District. School-site administrators and teachers had raised many concerns about the referral procedures. Special education administrators wanted to better understand their concerns in order to improve organizational features of the service delivery model. The evaluation questions studied were: 1) what are the specific concerns about the referral process; and, 2) what is needed for efficient delivery of services to students in need of support and help.

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Procedure and Data Sources

San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD) is the ninth largest urban school district in the nation and has an enrollment, kindergarten through grade 12, of 116,563 students (District Statistical Report, October 1987). The district operates 107 elementary schools; 8 middle schools; 12 junior high schools; 15 senior high schools; and, 11 atypical and special schools. In addition, preschool centers for three and four year old children are operated at 22 school sites, and one community care center operates for school-aged children. The special education department is an administrative unit within SDUSD and responsible for the provision of free, appropriate individualized education programs to all handicapped children birth to 22 years of age. In April 1987, 10.3 percent of the district enrollment was in special education (11,922 students). Fifty-four percent of the special education students are classified as specific learning disabled; nineteen percent as speech impaired; seven percent as mentally retarded, six percent as orthopedically handicapped; six percent as seriously emotionally disturbed; and the remaining handicaps such as other health impaired, deaf/hard of hearing, visually impaired, and deaf-blind are each less than five percent of the special education population.

A survey was developed especially for the program evaluation to assess the perceptions held by school principals, vice principals, counselors, and classroom teachers (special education and general education) about the referral process. The survey consisted of fixed alternative and open-ended questions. It was field tested with a sample of school-site personnel before the actual administration for the evaluation. The survey was conducted by mail to reach many respondents throughout the district. Fixed-choice questions gave descriptive information concerning the level of understanding held by the respondents about the referral process, roles of assessment personnel, and referral procedures. The responses to open-ended questions were analyzed following the constant comparative method of hypothesis testing (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Analytical categories were developed and tested simultaneously with data collection. In addition, resource specialists collected descriptive information on each referral made to special education at their school site during the months of November 1986 and March 1987. These months were selected as representative of the referral process operation. The information was collected to extend the analyses and include descriptive information about actual student referrals.

Results

Seven hundred and seven school site personnel responded to the survey (75 percent response). The findings indicated that the survey respondents, as a group, believed that they held a high level of understanding about functional aspects of the referral process. They were, as a group, most likely to interact with the resource specialist, school nurse, and psychologist to process referrals. Eighty-eight percent of the respondents indicated that they understood the referral procedures, and 96 percent indicated that they understood the IEP process. The respondents indicated high satisfaction with the type of expertise supplied by the special education assessment personnel. School administrators ranked consultation time between psychologists and classroom teachers for problem-solving and ways to improve classroom management as their highest priority. The counselors and teachers ranked direct services

to students and their families such as counseling as their highest need.

The respondents' comments were coded under two broad categories: organizational processes pertaining to the quantity and quality of the activities performed to identify and assess students for special education placement; and, **organizational structures** pertaining to the capacity of the assessment personnel for effective performance and ability to meet students' needs as perceived by the survey respondents. Subcategories were developed under **organizational processes** which pertained to communication between the assessment personnel and school site staff, decision-making activities, and timeliness in students receiving the services. Subcategories developed under **organizational structures** which pertained to time required to complete assessments, amount of documentation, availability of assessment personnel at the school-sites, and IEP meetings.

The respondents indicated the presence of very serious problems with the organizational process and structure of the referral procedure. The need to respond quickly to students with learning or behavioral problems was perceived as constrained by an overly complex system, excessive amount of paperwork, continuously changing policies and procedural guidelines, and lengthy meetings. Communication difficulties between the assessment personnel and the school-site staff were frequently mentioned. The respondent's comments indicated that the assessment personnel were often seen as working at cross-purposes to the school-site staff. A recurrent perception was that the assessment personnel were trying to block students' placement in special education. The general impression of the survey respondents was that the assessment personnel did not understand the needs of the school-site staff or include their suggestions and recommendations as part of the decision-making process in determining students' eligibility for special education. Illustrative comments of the respondents concerns are given below:

> "The backlog in referrals and assessments has been a tremendous problem. It is now March-we have students who were referred in October that are now being certified. Students in need of services are not getting served." (site administrator)
>
> "The whole process of referring students is overwhelming. The process needs to be streamlined. Most teachers are reluctant to invest that much time in filling out forms." (general education teacher)
>
> "Listen more to input of site personnel. The input of site personnel should carry more weight than it does. Members of the teams should spend more time in classrooms if they are not going to take into account the site personnel's input." (special education teacher)
>
> "Some students only need identification of their problems and suggestions to the classroom teacher about how to help the child. Streamline the process for more follow-up activities for students and faster serious to students with serious disabilities." (site administrator)

> The IEP conference is too long...some of the team members seem to be prepared to stay for hours." (site administrator)
>
> The team at our site is extremely effective in fulfilling their responsibilities. However, the major problem is time. We have only 1½ days of psychologist time in our inner city school of 860 children. We have a dedicated staff. Still, many of our needs are not met due to the heavy case load (site administrator).

Although many problems were identified with the special education referral process, the assessment personnel were described as highly competent in their area of expertise and considered to be a valuable resource to the school-site. The current service delivery model was seen the only way to access their expertise. The service delivery model was perceived as not operating effectively and meet the needs of students who were experiencing learning or behavioral difficulties.

Descriptive information was collected on all students referred for the first-time to special education. These data were collected during the months of November 1986 and March 1987. Eighty-two percent of the schools voluntarily participated in the collecting the data each month. The combined total for the two months was 1,358 referrals or 1.2 percent of the district's student enrollment. Two-thirds of the referrals each month were from the elementary schools and one-third from secondary schools. The highest percentages of referrals were in grades one and two. The referrals declined in subsequent elementary grades with the lowest percent being for sixth graders. Approximately one-third more boys than girls were referred to special education. Analysis of the distribution of referrals by racial and ethnic groups indicates students classified as White made up the highest percentage of special education referrals. Interestingly, White students accounted for a larger percentage of the elementary school referrals than secondary school referrals. The reverse trend was noted for Hispanic students and for Black students. Comparison of special education and total district enrollment by racial and ethnic groups indicated Black students are overrepresented by 7.2 percent; Hispanic students by 1.4 percent; and White students by 1.0 percent.

In light of the school-site staff perceptions that serious problems existed with the special education process, these data have several important implications. First, there may not be enough assessment personnel to respond to the large numbers of students referred special education each month. A final decision was reached for 44 percent of the November referrals and 58 percent of the March referrals. The remaining referrals were reported as incomplete. The reasons typically given were waiting for a psychologist's assessment, waiting to schedule IEP meeting, testing was in progress, still collecting documentation, for seriously emotionally disturbed program, and referred to another team for more assessment. Second, referring a student to special education provides a classroom teacher with an indepth diagnostic workup by a team of experts which can include a psychologist, speech pathologist, diagnostic teacher, and nurse. Teachers appeared to be using the special education referral as a means of obtaining assistance for high risk students, and, often, before other intervention approaches had been exhausted.

Educational Significance and Analysis

1. District psychologists are funded through special education with the exception of a few psychologists funded through gifted and talented program monies. The funding model creates competition for scarce resources that can be used to provide services to students. Because the psychologist's first obligation is to work with special education, the referral process becomes the only avenue to secure support and assistance for students.

2. Psychologists and other assessment personnel are perceived to have full control of the decisions made about student eligibility and generally regarded as "gatekeepers" to special education services. Their decisions about student needs are based on professional standards. School-site personnel perceive these decisions to be made solely on data sources valued by the psychologists, that is, test scores and observations conducted during testing. School-site staff believe that their own observations about students' needs are discounted. Mehan (1981) described the competing obligations of demand for professional excellence and administrative responsibilities.

3. Special education is administered and operates as a separate educational system within school districts. The administrative guidelines governing operation of the referral process are perceived of as confusing, inconsistent and not designed to expedite services to students. The compliance with guidelines and regulations has resulted in a highly complicated bureaucratic system.

4. The criticism that a "search for pathology" (Sarason & Doris, 1978) focusing on what's wrong with students drives the referral process and is a major concern. Ysseldyke et. al (1983) found teachers have come to expect referred students will be placed into special education because the high referral-to-placement rate. The emphasis tends to be on accumulation or information about students deficiencies, instead of systematic implementation of classroom instruction or finding ways to adapt instruction to a common curriculum.

5. The referral rates particularly in elementary schools indicate school-site staff need assistance with large numbers of students and have few options outside of special education. Once students are placed into special education very few are "mainstreamed" or returned to general education (Sansone & Zigmond, 1986).

Conclusions

The referral process is heavily used in SDSU and operates with organizational problems inherent to the funding patterns and procedural guidelines for local special education programs. The struggle for access to and control of resources that could be used to assist students was evaluated to have a main effect upon perceptions of school-site administrators, counselors, and teachers about the effectiveness of the referral process. The concern that students' needs were not getting met in a timely manner as a result was frequently expressed. When these findings are considered in light of potential long-range outcomes is for students who are having difficulty in general education, needed change and restructuring of special education is of major importance. The current model and service patterns certainly appear to create more barriers than benefits for students. The concerns raised in this paper are not unique to SDUSD but found in other districts as well and are long-standing. Wang, Reynolds & Walberg (1986) address the need to restructure special education in ways that result in more coordinated and integrated services to all students. The evidence for more effective service delivery has been well established by evaluation research. Alternative strategies have been examined in light of policy criteria and impact. It is time to evaluate current policy and procedural guidelines by using our knowledge base to implement change beginning with the federal legislation. We strongly believe that referral for the diagnostic and consultative expertise of the assessment personnel can be used to help students. It's now time to start doing something about it!

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Abstract

The understandings and perceptions held by school-site administrators and teachers about the process and procedures followed in referring students for special education were studied as part of the required annual evaluation of the special education program in San Diego Unified School District, San Diego, California. Analysis of descriptive and qualitative data indicated that the referral process was heavily used as a resource for students in need of assistance even though many students were not eligible for special education services. The problems inherent in the funding patterns, procedural guidelines, and responsibilities of the assessment personnel are discussed and recommendations are made for organizational change and restructuring of the process.

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